

002 - Aftermath by nervousalligator

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002 - Aftermath

The giant, all-consuming sky burns his eyes as Jonathan squints at it, leaned back against the door of his car. He closes them for a moment and tries to gather his frayed mind, but the loud chatter of people getting out of school on a Friday afternoon overpowers him.

The latest couple of hours have been a nauseating blur and if people thought he was a weirdo already his distant looks and teachers having to call out to him three times before getting a response probably didn't work in his favor. He didn't particularly care for that, though, but he *did* care when Nancy had asked him if he was ok when he couldn't answer her question about them meeting up this weekend, eyes flickering down to the floor constantly. Usually he was really good at hiding his emotions behind standoffish glares, but not with her, and she could always tell. Something was holding him back, though. He just couldn't find it in him to casually mention that he had been through a living paranormal nightmare this afternoon while pulling math books out of his locker. That he's terrified and feels like he's losing his mind. Was it even real? Had what he thought had happened actually happened? He had no idea this might be what El goes through when she goes to that place. What that place even was. What this even *means*. *How the hell this even happened-*

He jumps suddenly, startled. Somebody just called out his name. He looks over and breathes a sigh of, to some extent, relief. It's Will. He's got El with him, tumbling out of the main entrance in a hurry while the rest of the party look on in confusion. He buries his hands in his pockets and gives them a nod, trying not to look too shaken as they approach him.

"Hey," he pants at them even though he wasn't the one that just bolted. Will repeats it back to him with appropriate panting but El stays silent. He searches her eyes and find them staring back at him closely, curious but also worried. His stomach churns. Well *fuck*. She knows. The tiny voice that has been trying to assure him it was all a fluke, some kind of weird version of fainting, that he's *just imagining it*, dies horribly.

"Didn't you get out of school already?" Will asks.

“Yeah?” Jonathan shrugs, trying to relax his tense shoulders. “I’m just waiting for you guys.”

“We’re supposed to go to the arcade tonight, though,” Will remarks, motioning towards his friends still looking very much confused by the entrance. “We told you...”

Right, fuck, they’re supposed to hang out with the party tonight. He totally forgot. “Oh-”

“We’re not going, though,” Will assures him.

“We need to talk,” El says, keeping her eyes fixated. Will nods.

Jonathan glances at them both and nods in return. “Let’s go,” he mumbles and gets into his car.

“Hey, wait a second!” Dustin suddenly calls out as the party approaches them. Jonathan rubs a hand over his temples trying not to look too exasperated. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Will stops mid motion opening the backseat door and fumbles for a good excuse. He’s never been very good at lying.

“Oh, uuh, I-I’m sorry guys, Jonathan just told us we gotta do some family stuff tonight!”

Well, he’s not *wrong*.

“Aw come on,” Dustin protests. “Family stuff? It’s Friday, we were gonna go to the arcade! Lucas got some serious coin from his grandma this-!”

“Like I’m gonna share my birthday present with any of *you* idiots,” Lucas deadpans.

“Fine,” Dustin moans, “but El, how are we gonna cheat if you can’t pull the coins back into-”

“*Will!*” Jonathan yells from inside the car, more a call for help than he wants to admit, and it startles the other kids.

Will grabs El's hand, waves goodbye and pulls her into the car with him. Jonathan practically steps on it, leaving the party in the settling dust.

They don't say a word during the entire ride home. Jonathan can feel Will and El's eyes on him from the backseat, but they stay silent and he cannot drive and talk at the same time right now. He's not usually a reckless driver, but he can't even pretend he's not dying to get home as quickly as possible, taking any shortcuts and close calls he can. He slows down a little bit after almost running over a crossing cyclist, though.

It's a weird, quiet understanding that later makes them go into their house, taking off their jackets and leaving their bags, walking down the hall into Will and El's room and closing the door - all in complete silence. They sit down in a ring on the carpet like they always do when they're having their sessions, only this time without blindfolds and radios. Jonathan stares at a point somewhere in the middle of them, rubbing his shoulders, and he feels their stare at a point somewhere in the middle of his face for what seems like forever. Eventually his hands come down, twisting into themselves while he manages a deep sigh.

"It's not like meditating," he finally blurts out, looking up to face El. "It's more like lucid dreaming." *Or a lucid nightmare*, he adds to himself.

El blinks. "Lucid...dreaming?"

"Yeah. It's when you're in a dream but you're aware of it, so you can sort of think about it. You can control what happens." She looks at him intently, intrigued, and he continues. "Everything is weightless and in the back of your mind you realize that you're not *actually* there, but all impressions tell your brain otherwise. You can't see or hear or speak, but at the same time everything is...clear."

El nods slowly. Suddenly Will pipes up, unable to contain himself any longer.

"You...you did the thing!" he beams. Jonathan and El break their stare to look at him. "You totally did the thing, right El?"

"Yes." She turns back to Jonathan. "You talked to me."

"It was so weird," Will interrupts, excited. "We were outside during lunch break and El, she was looking at some flowers on the ground, and then she just suddenly stood up and looked at me, and she said your name-!"

Jonathan must be giving his brother a grim look because he sinks down, smile fading. "We...we knew something was up."

"How did it happen?" El asks. Jonathan leans his head into his hands and sighs.

"I don't know. I was...in the darkroom. Developing pictures. I was just going to prepare the latest film I'd been using in the prep-" He looks up to find them looking slightly confused. "The darkroom? You- The film is sensitive to light so you have to go into this pitch black little room to cut it and roll it onto this wheel and put into this tank to prepare it for developer fluids and-" He's not getting anywhere with them. He sighs again. "It's very dark, basically."

El leans back. Will keeps looking confused.

"Wait, so you can't see *anything*?"

"Not a single thing."

"But how do you know what you're doing?"

Jonathan shrugs. "You just do it a lot."

Will mouths a small "Oh".

"You just have to go on feeling to get things right," Jonathan continues as his eyes start to wander around the room. "I guess I was sort of zoning out like I always do when I'm-"

His eyes fixate on one of his photographs that El has put up over her bed. His face drops as it dawns on him. *The pictures of her. The static*

on the radio.

“What?” Will asks anxiously. “When you’re what?”

“I was developing a lot of pictures of you,” Jonathan says, looking back at El. “They were fresh in my mind. And there’s a radio there that never works right so it fades into this static noise constantly.”

She nods. “That’s why you came to see *me*. Because of the pictures.”

“Yeah.” He remembers now how El managed to contact Will and Barbara on the other side that time in the kiddie pool using only photographs. She’d never even met them before that. “I guess I fell into some kind of...trance? It was very weird. Like I was...” He blinks a few times, trying to make sense of it. “Like I was awake and asleep at the same time.”

El keeps nodding, encouraging him. Then his breath catches in his throat as it comes back to him.

“There was...blood,” he mumbles. His hand comes up to cover his mouth briefly, subconsciously telling. “And the lights were going crazy.”

“Could you take me there, Jonathan?” Will pleads. “I want to-”

“No.”

“But-”

“No, alright?” Jonathan bites. “It’s not a good place to be. When I came to, it was...I was...” he trails off, eyes darting down to look at his twisting hands, heart suddenly racing. Then El reaches out and lays one of her hands over his. For some reason it calms him.

“You were scared,” she says knowingly. He curls his fingers to hold her small ones gently.

“Yeah,” he admits under his breath.

She squeezes his hand. “It won’t be the same if we’re with you. It’s not as scary when you’re not alone.”

"You...you think that I *actually*..." Jonathan shakes his head in disbelief. "That I actually managed to do this...*thing*?"

"Mind reading," Will concludes.

Jonathan licks his lips, brows furrowing. "It...it isn't quite like how that would work. I mean, I *think*," he looks to El, seeking her recognition. "I didn't read your mind. We just...talked, somehow."

"It's something like that," El agrees.

"But how...?" Jonathan presses. "*Why*?"

"I don't...know." She pulls her hand back, seemingly as lost for answers as he is.

Jonathan's eyes flutter down to the floor for a moment before he looks up at them again, pained. "I don't know if I want to go there again. Wherever *there* was."

"What? Why not?" Will protests. "You can't just *not* do it! Don't you understand what this means? What if you can do things like El can? What if you can move things too?"

The thought that there might be more to this hadn't even occurred to him. He scoffs. "Will, that's ridiculous- There's no way I could-"

"Maybe," El cuts him off. He raises his eyebrows at her.

"Really?"

"I'm not sure." She looks around the room like she's searching for something. Words probably. Then her eyes come back to him. "Some can find people." She looks over at Will. "Some can't."

Will looks defeated. "So you're saying I can't do it?"

"I don't know. People are different. Sometimes it takes time to find it."

Jonathan frowns. "Are you *sure* it wasn't just *you* trying to contact *me* in this case? Without knowing, maybe...?"

“Jonathan, your nose was bleeding,” Will deadpans. “You don’t get those unless you’re using powers.”

“People get nosebleeds!” Jonathan reasons. Will gives him a skeptical look. He resigns.

El shakes her head. “You have to focus for it to happen. And...” she trails off.

Will and Jonathan lean forward. “And?”

“There’s...something different. About you. When I tried to talk to Mike before, in the cabin...he wouldn’t answer.” She catches Jonathan’s eyes with that intensity that only she knows, wisdom beyond her years in them - as if she could peer into his very soul. “You spoke so clearly. You saw me so clearly.”

Jonathan opens his mouth to say something, but instead a familiar voice calls out to them from outside the room. Mom is home.

They all shuffle to their feet quickly, giving each other a look.

“Don’t tell mom,” Jonathan hisses. “*Or* Hopper. Ok?”

Will and El look skeptical, but nod briefly before they all scurry out of their room down the hall, Will closing the door behind them. They find Joyce by the front door. She lights up when she sees them.

“Hey!”

They all stammer their greetings to her. She turns to Jonathan, smiling expectantly. “Did you start dinner yet? I’m starving, I barely had time for lunch today.”

Jonathan needs a moment to go through the latest hour or two to even understand her question.

“Oh!” *Oh right.* He was supposed to start dinner tonight. Considering the circumstances he’s willing to cut himself some slack for forgetting, though. “Uuh, I’m sorry mom,” he stammers folding his arms, one hand squeezing the back of his neck. “I...I forgot?”

Joyce's smile fades and she sighs as she drops her purse on the couch. "Jonathan! You *forgot*?"

"I'm sorry! I was picking up Will and El and-" he motions to them and then up to the ceiling for some reason, seeking answers from above.

"You could've *called* me. What have you been doing all afternoon?"

"We just got lost uuh, doing uuh-"

"And what are you two doing home so early anyway?" she probes, looking at Will and El. "Weren't you going to the arcade with your friends tonight?"

"No, they're just-" Jonathan tries.

"Ok mom, we didn't want to tell you this," Will suddenly but firmly interrupts, stepping forward. "But the reason he forgot and why we're home is because we were in our room making something for your birthday." A spark of innocence lights in his soft, wide eyes. "Don't get mad."

El quickly joins in, perfectly replicating Will's doe-eyed look. He's been teaching her, Jonathan notes. Both he and Joyce have a hard time saying no when Will pulls that face. Not that he does it very often, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

Joyce blinks, tensed shoulders sagging down. Then a smile spreads across her face. "What? For me? But that's not for another month! Oh, but *sweetie!*"

Jonathan just looks on with eyebrows raised as his mom pinches the cheek of his brother, making kissy noises, and Will laughs what is hopefully not too nervously. Maybe he wasn't such a bad liar after all.

He clears his throat. "So, uh, Ray's? I'll pick up a movie on the way as well."

Everybody stops what they're doing. Will and El direct their eyes to Joyce in anticipation. She sighs and roll hers playfully. "Sure." She turns to the couch.

"It's fine mom, I've got it."

"Can we go too?" El wonders.

"To pick up?" Joyce asks. Before they come up with an answer she gives them a knowing smile - of what they're not sure. "Oh. Yeah, of course honey! You can all go." She starts to shoo them away with her hands. "I'll just prepare some dessert for later in the meantime."

Jonathan throws his head back and stares up into the roof of his car for a moment as Will and El fumble for the seatbelts.

"Now she won't ask us what we're doing in our room for a while at least," Will says.

"Yeah, that's...that's good," Jonathan nods. Then he sighs deeply. "Now there's only one problem."

Both of them looking troubled, Will leans forward. "What?"

Jonathan swings one of his arms up on his seat and turns to look out the rear window, starting to roll out of the driveway. "We have to make something for mom."